

SAN JOSE MERCURY NEWS

MAY 27 1987

Webster vows to uphold Constitution as CIA chief

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p 7A

WASHINGTON — William H. Webster, the former judge who helped allay concerns that the FBI routinely had abused civil liberties, was sworn in Tuesday as the 14th director of the Central Intelligence Agency.

Directed by President Reagan to "maintain (the CIA's) high standards," Webster takes over at a time when the agency is under scrutiny by Congress for its purported role in providing possibly illegal aid to Nicaraguan Contras.

Webster, in brief remarks after being sworn in, pledged to carry out the CIA's mission abroad "with fidelity to the Constitution and to the laws of our beloved country."

His friends long have praised Webster for his devotion to the rule of law and have said his greatest contribution as FBI director was his insistence that it adhere to strict legal procedures in investigations and covert operations.

Reagan presided over the open-air swearing-in ceremony at CIA headquarters in Langley, Va., about eight miles from the White House.

In his new post, Webster succeeds William Casey, a Reagan confidant who died earlier this month from a brain tumor.

Just as he praised Webster for raising the FBI's standards, Reagan also praised Casey — a prime player in the Office of Strategic Services during

World War II — as a person "whose determination and personal courage in the clandestine effort against Adolph Hitler meant the difference between victory and defeat."

The president also defended the CIA against critics who say it has overstepped its bounds in carrying on questionable covert operations in distant places.

"The United States cannot survive in the modern world without a vigorous intelligence agency capable of acting swiftly in secret," Reagan said. "So long as I am president, I will never consent to see our intelligence capability undermined."

Webster, 63, is noted chiefly for his experience in law enforcement and the judiciary, although he has had some exposure to counterintelligence operations as the FBI chief.

A former U.S. attorney in St. Louis, his hometown, and a federal appeals court judge for the 8th Circuit, Webster was appointed to direct the FBI in 1978.

His tenure there, particularly in the early years, was marked by efforts to undo the damage wrought by the late J. Edgar Hoover, whose autocratic administrative style and zealous anti-communism led the bureau into recurrent abuses of citizens' civil liberties.

More recently, Webster increased the bureau's personnel and made better use of high-technology equipment in crime detection.



Associated Press

William Webster, right, talks to President Reagan

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